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SUBJECT: "THE BLEEDING MUST STOP": FIRST FEMALE  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE DISCUSSES CAMPAIGN WITH AMBASSADOR

REF: 2005 SANAA 3558

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. On April 12, Ambassador met with Sumaya Raja, Yemen's first female presidential candidate (reftel). Raja explained that she was running as an independent candidate on an anti-corruption platform. She hopes to generate support from alienated groups, especially young voters. Ambassador stressed that the U.S. Government would not get involved in the politics, but would watch to see if the elections were free and fair. Raja voiced her concerns about election preparations, showing Ambassador evidence that election officials registered children to vote. End Summary.

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"THE BLEEDING MUST STOP": Anti-Corruption Platform  
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¶2. (SBU) Raja told Ambassador during a meeting at his residence that she was running for president because she wanted to fight corruption. She believes that corruption has increased over the last five years, saying "the bleeding has to stop." Emphasizing that she "intends to win," Raja said that even if she lost, she would be satisfied if her campaign encouraged public dialogue on corruption and accountability.

¶3. (SBU) Raja, who is self-financing her campaign, hopes to target the "disaffected" for support, who she described as those without strong tribal and religious ties and who are angered by pervasive corruption. She introduced her campaign manager, Mahfoutha al-Sifas, a political activist from northern Yemen. Sifas told Ambassador the story of her last foray into politics, when she ran for a parliamentary seat in the 2003 elections. Sifas, running as an independent, was ahead of the ruling party's candidate by thousands of votes with 10 out of 13 districts counted. When all the district results were counted, however, al-Sifas had somehow lost votes from the previous tally and ended up losing to the ruling party candidate.

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Free and Fair Elections?  
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¶4. (SBU) Ambassador stressed that the USG would watch to see if this year's elections are free and fair. In addition to registration and voting, he continued, the campaign process itself would also be monitored, stressing the need for free public debate of the issues and equal access to the media for all candidates. Raja agreed, adding that because newspapers reach only two percent of the population, candidates must have access to government-owned radio and television stations. (Note: The ROYG controls all radio and television

stations within the country. End Note).

15. (SBU) Raja shared her concerns that elections procedures were already being compromised. One of her primary concerns was that children were being registered to vote. She showed Ambassador color copies of voter registration cards for 10 voters listed as 22 years old, but whose pictures appear to be of children well-under the legal voting age of 18. Raja also expressed concern for her own safety. "I know the President," she said, "and he would not condone any violence against opposition candidates, but he has lots of supporters who like to do him favors."

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Comment  
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16. (SBU) Raja herself admits that she is a tough sell to the Yemeni public. She has not lived in Yemen for 10 years and is divorced from a foreigner. In fact, any candidate -- male or female -- who runs as an independent will find it difficult to break into the relatively closed Yemeni political system, which is dominated by a handful of powerful government officials and tribal leaders. As she stated, however, her campaign could play an important role in encouraging public dialogue about corruption and women's political participation. Already, her candidacy has encouraged two more women to become presidential candidates. Unfortunately, however, Raja's candidacy seems to be generating more interest and coverage in the international media than the local press, which is consumed at the present with the larger issues of fraud that Raja has also raised.

17. (SBU) Post will follow-up on the accusations of fraudulent registration with the Supreme Commission on Elections and Referendum (SCER) as well as the National Democratic Institute, which is planning to monitor the September elections, and which is providing support to the SCER to update its voter registration rolls, specifically to

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eliminate underage voters.  
Krajeski